Being “design driven” means operating in a fundamentally different way. In this video, McKinsey’s Mahin Samadani explains how companies can make the transition.

All companies claim to prioritize their customers. So why do so many companies seem to struggle to understand what customers want and need? In this interview, the vice president of experience design at McKinsey Digital Labs, Mahin Samadani, explains how design thinking forces companies to truly understand their customers. An edited transcript of Samadani’s remarks follows.

A design-driven organization is always thinking about its customers, empathizing with end users, and trying to solve problems while keeping its customers in mind. That means, from the outset, doing research and immersing with and understanding customer needs and pain points—but, then, going back and testing and validating and constantly listening, taking surveys, and truly understanding, What do people like about what we’re doing? What don’t they like? How can we iterate and refine?

Why CEOs must drive design thinking

Companies that have placed design at the center of the organization perform better. It allows an organization to differentiate, fend off competitors, and charge a premium. The CEO can bring design into the center of the organization by elevating the role, quite simply, and by asking some questions: What is the title of our most senior designer? How often do we talk to our customers? Do we empathize with them? Do we understand their pain points? Are we creating solutions that address those pain points? If the answer to all of those is yes, it’s quite likely that you’re doing a good job with design in your organization.

How design thinking is changing companies

We often see companies struggling with design from a couple angles. One is just design management. Design is trending, and bringing in lots of designers and employing design thinking is very common and very popular. But that results in some changes in the organization, new ways of doing things, new ways of thinking about things, and new products. Managing through that can be challenging. It’s not as simple as just hiring a bunch of designers and creating a studio. There needs to be an organizational change and process changes—
innovation management and design management, so to speak. So what are the processes that need to change in order to think from a more customer-centered point of view from the top down? How are we going to change the way that we actually create products, test them, ship them, and refine them over time?

The shift in consumer electronics has been fascinating. You see so many more companies focused on design, adding studios, bringing on design executives, and changing the way they think about their products and how they create products. Cell phones, for example, or smartphones used to be very much features and function led—it has this processor, this much memory, et cetera—that’s completely shifted. It’s all about the lifestyle and the experience now and the services around it. That’s a function of design thinking permeating these enterprises and consumer-electronics manufacturers. And as products become more complex, what’s very interesting is that consumers are demanding more simplicity from the experiences. That requires design thinking.

Mahin Samadani is vice president of experience design at McKinsey Digital Labs and is based in McKinsey’s San Francisco office. This interview was conducted by McKinsey Digital and Marketing & Sales practices’ Barr Seitz.